

'EMERGENCY MAC' RETIRES — WELL ALMOST

Last month saw the retirement of Dr Alan McMahon, the 'father' of pre-hospital emergency medicine in South Africa and a man whose revolutionary changes continue to save countless lives.

McMahon, the principal doctor on call in the Cape's Metro Rescue Service for nearly two decades, transformed a mediocre ambulance transport fleet run by St John's into an efficient, highly trained and well-equipped rescue unit.

His primary strategic goal was to save the patient.

He changed the mere transportation of injured patients to hospital into medical care on site, resuscitation and stabilisation, a model that was adopted with burgeoning success across the country.

Among his achievements was popularising the 'Jaws of Life' hydraulic device for extricating vehicle accident victims from tangled metal wrecks and the pragmatic local re-design, manufacture and equipping of ambulances.

The Jaws of Life, first imported in 1975 by Milnerton Fire Brigade Chief, Bob Muir, reduced extrication time from between 1 and 2 hours to between 10 minutes and half an hour. It immediately began saving lives.

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McMahon lobbied for more of the equipment and was consulted and eventually emulated by metropolitan authorities across the country, gaining an international reputation in emergency medicine. He created a template for the co-ordination of search, rescue and treatment efforts of what is



Dr Alan McMahon directs proceedings to save the life of a trapped motorist.

now known as Metro Rescue Services in the Western Cape, the Mountain Club of South Africa, the National Sea Rescue Institute, traffic, fire and police departments and hospitals.

McMahon is also considered by many as the architect of what was initially called the 'down and out' programme — today better known nationally as the 'watershed' shift of resources and staff from hospitals to primary health care.

Says Dr Tom Sutcliffe, former Western Cape health chief (McMahon was his deputy for several years), 'we inherited hospi-centric care and he changed all that by centralising hospital services through clinics — basically the forerunner to the democratic government's primary health care approach'.

Sutcliffe says McMahon 'revolutionised' ambulance care, introduced paramedical training and advance life support systems and was 'on duty 24/7, 52 weeks a year'.

'He was a dynamic administrator and thinker around medical strategies. When I came to the Cape I was

delighted to have his mind — he could think in quantum leaps.'

Lester Coelen, former Convenor of the Mountain Club of South Africa's Search and Rescue sub-committee, said his abiding memory of McMahon was an attitude of 'let's solve the rescue problem and worry about the red tape later'.

'His whole focus was on getting the right combination of resources into the field to effect the rescue — it was all centred around the patients' best interests.'

McMahon had set up 24-hour radio communications between various emergency rescue bodies across the province and created a multiple-mode transport infrastructure that could 'get us from A to B very quickly'.

Dr Cleve Robertson, current Director of the Western Cape's Emergency Medical Services, said of his predecessor, 'his contribution to EMS was national and international, he gave up his whole life to make sure it worked'. Robertson described McMahon's being on call for so long as



In typical rescue mode, Dr Alan McMahon (left).

‘a selflessness and altruism that is incredible, almost unbelievable’.

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Western Cape Metro’s chief professional nurse, Sister Liz Crossley, a colleague of 22 years, described him as ‘decisive and not scared to get his hands dirty’.

‘You also knew that if he said something, he had thought it through and it made sense,’ she said, describing how he would order cranes and heavy equipment to stand by in seemingly ridiculous positions.

After over a decade away from the Metro control station, he could still direct somebody to the exact place in a storeroom to fetch something he needed.

A recipient of the State President’s Award for his outstanding contribution to society, and a Paul Harris Fellow for his contribution to EMS, McMahon chuckles when asked to give examples of how he side-

stepped bureaucracy.

Recalling a horrific bus accident at Wuppertal ‘around 1978’ in which 40 people were trapped and injured, he said he persuaded Court Helicopters chief, Jeremy Labuschagne, to hire him his biggest helicopter.

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‘Choppers cost a fortune and we flew to Clanwilliam and then turned right and followed the road for ages. We flew and flew but there was no bus. As we came round the very last bend before Wuppertal there it was, a couple of hundred metres down a cliff. I’ve never been so relieved to see a crash scene,’ he said.

Until his retirement early this year McMahon was Chief Director of Special Projects in the Western Cape Premier’s office. ‘Mac’ as he is popularly known to journalists and civil servants alike, cannot bear being idle. Despite suffering a series of minor strokes recently, he has eagerly accepted Robertson’s offer to examine and upgrade disaster contingency scenarios, casualty management and planning for the province.

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